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ABSTRACT

This article provides six criteria to help teachers decide which multiculturally-focused instructional materials might most appropriately meet their needs. The criteria hinge on two assumptions: (1) the criteria stem from a definitional assumption; and (2) students bring different learning styles to school that reflect the diverse makeup of classes. The six general criteria useful for selection of materials include: (1) sound instructional content; (2) awareness of culturally different learning styles; (3) a democratic orientation; (4) development of mutual cultural understanding; (5) preparation for life in a global society; and (6) teaching methods. Contains 12 references. (EH)

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MULTICULTURAL INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS: HOW TO CHOOSE?

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MULTICULTURAL INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS: HOW TO CHOOSE?

The promotion of racial and gender equity, the celebration of cultural diversity, and the growing influence of minorities in local and national policy-making have swelled the number of voices heard in America's public forums. America's increasing diversity makes a multicultural perspective imperative for the continuation and advancement of rational public discourse.

This pluralistic tendency is reflected in our schools, and the implication of this reality is profound. For instance, the National Education Goals--set for achievement by the year 2000--target the need for America's inservice and preservice teachers to access "activities that will provide such teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to teach to an increasingly diverse student population with a variety of educational, social, and health needs" (National Educational Goals Panel 1995, 11). More specifically, the National Council for the Social Studies recognized this imperative when in 1991 it reaffirmed the importance of multicultural education through a "commitment to

educational programs and curricula that reflect the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity within the United States and the world" (NCSS Task Force on Ethnic Studies Curriculum Guidelines 1992, 274).

The publication of numerous multicultural instructional materials has accompanied this growing imperative. For example, the largest clearinghouse for commercially produced social studies instructional materials lists over 650 items in its *Multicultural Studies 1996* catalogue (Social Studies School Service 1996).

Given the daunting task of deciding which of the almost endless stream of multiculturally focused instructional materials best meet our classroom needs, this article provides six criteria for making these decisions. The criteria stem from literature in multicultural education and related aspects of global education and from my fifteen years of experience in teaching diverse populations in Chicago area secondary schools. In addition, the criteria include key questions one might consider when deciding on the viability of the materials under consideration.

Two Basic Assumptions

The six criteria hinge on two distinct, yet related,

assumptions. First, the criteria stem from a definitional assumption. Defined traditionally, multicultural education should strive to enhance student understanding of the human diversity that exists "within the boundaries of a nation-state" (Banks and Banks 1996, xii). Conceptually, this assumption requires extension to a more global orientation because students' perceptions of societal diversity develop, in large part, from their exposure to mass media's portrayal of cultures both within and beyond our nation's borders. The definition of human diversity underlying this assumption embraces aspects of culture and society as seemingly separate and complex as ethnicity, nationality, gender, and race.

Second, students bring different learning styles to school that reflect the diverse makeup of our classes. A singular approach to instruction may not involve all students to the best of their abilities. In planning instruction, we must assume that addressing these multiple learning styles is an integral aspect of multicultural education.

Six Criteria for Evaluating Multicultural Instructional Materials

The following criteria are purposely broad in scope. They are stated in general terms because specific student needs frame

a teacher's instructional decision-making. As such, these criteria require refinement and application based upon the unique makeup of our classes and the teaching philosophies we hold as a consequence of our students' diverse needs.

Criterion One: Sound Instructional Content

Multicultural education covers many aspects of culture, but language, religion, ethnicity, gender, and issues of race are at the heart of this concept. They form a content base on which students can develop a balanced comparison with their own cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes. Consequently, content addressed by multicultural instructional materials should reflect the findings of sound research in the behavioral and social sciences and history.

It would be unreasonable to expect any single instructional material to cover all of these areas of content. However, instructional materials aimed at supporting multicultural education should focus on at least one of these content areas.

Do the materials:

(a) include content that covers one or more of the aspects of culture cited above;

(b) utilize content based on the best available research and scholarship; and

(c) encourage a comparative analysis between all cultures?

Criterion Two: Awareness of Culturally Different Learning Styles

Research in cognitive and educational psychology indicates that cultural background, life experiences, and, to a lesser known degree, genetic makeup may affect how an individual learns. In summarizing these findings, Christine Bennett noted that "learning style is believed to be a combination of both heredity and environment" (Bennett 1990, 141).

Variations in learning styles may stem from diverse socio-cultural contexts because different cultures possess "unique value systems" and "many ways of being human" (Gilliom n.d.). As a result, the values, attitudes, methodologies, and behaviors that encompass culturally diverse learning styles should be evident in the curricular materials (NCSS Task Force on Ethnic Studies Curriculum Guidelines 1992, 276-9).

In a classroom populated with culturally diverse students, differences in learning styles are clearly evident, and the instructional materials should show a sensitivity to this fact. However, even though one's students may be culturally homogeneous, this situation should not preclude attention to this criterion. A culturally homogeneous group of students may require as much, if not more, attention to understanding diverse

learning styles. Although different learning styles may not be clearly evident within a homogeneous class, students will encounter them throughout their lives. Thus, acknowledging and addressing these differences should be an important objective of the materials under evaluation.

Do the materials:

(a) include alternatives for developing and exercising different learning styles;

(b) adjust readily to serve different learning styles; and

(c) encourage an understanding of culturally diverse learning styles?

Criterion Three: A Democratic Orientation

This criterion focuses on the capacity of the materials to nurture racial and ethnic harmony through an orientation based on democratic ideals and civic virtues. Essential democratic ideals, embedded in and extending from the foundational documents that define our democracy, include justice, equity, and freedom. Civic virtues essential to operationalizing democratic ideals include "self-discipline, civility, compassion, tolerance, and respect for the worth and dignity of all individuals" (Patrick 1996, 16).

To accomplish this goal, the use of multicultural materials

should foster a respect for divergent thought through an accurate and objective presentation of information. This unbiased approach is critical if students are to gain a respect for multiple cultural perspectives because the way in which the materials present content will impact student development of intercultural competence.

Implicit in this criterion is the potential use of the materials to "empower students from victimized groups . . . by teaching them decision-making and social action skills" (Banks 1989, 20). In so doing, the materials should vitalize essential elements of effective and responsible democratic citizenship such as empathic communication, respect for fairness and order, and participation in one's community (Reardon 1988; Bennett 1990).

Do the materials:

(a) orient themselves within a context of democratic ideals and accompanying civic virtues;

(b) foster open discussion that brings to bear divergent thinking on issues, problems, and trends addressed by the materials;

(c) present students with accurate and objective information in order to explore alternative possibilities, as opposed to biased presentations that might lead them to closed,

convergent points of view; and

(d) promote competencies for democratic citizenship such as decision-making and social action skills?

Criterion Four: Development of Mutual Cultural Understanding

One of the major goals of multicultural education is to dissolve the "we-they" ethnocentric dualism so common in American society. This goal is especially important because cultures have much to offer each other. For instance, jazz, considered by musicologists as a wholly American genre, grew from the work songs, laments, and spirituals sung by American slaves that derived ultimately from African antecedents. Without mutual cultural understanding, cultural groups will remain uninformed of each other's rich contributions to society, only to concentrate on the exoticism of difference. As a result, the instructional materials should strive to nurture an appreciation of all cultural groups, with particular attention to contributions from each group that enrich the human condition.

Given that people assume their cultural superiority over others, multicultural instructional materials should aid in developing what Hanvey termed a "perspective consciousness" that leads to mutual cultural understanding. Hanvey defined perspective consciousness as the understanding that your view of

the world and others changes frequently and may not be accurate (Hanvey 1975, 4). To aid in developing this perspective, instructional objectives and accompanying teaching strategies should encourage a critical analysis of ethnocentric stereotypes.

Do the materials:

(a) highlight diverse cultural contributions to society as building blocks for understanding universal and diverse cultural values;

(b) nurture a consciousness that one's perspective of the world is in a constant state of flux and is not necessarily shared by others; and

(c) combat racism, prejudice, and discrimination by stressing basic human similarities through a critical analysis of ethnocentric stereotypes?

Criterion Five: Preparation for Life in a Global Society

Social action skills requisite for effective citizenship in a multicultural society are also necessary for the improvement of the global human condition (Anderson 1994, 24). Myriad transnational issues (e.g., the environment, global economics, world peace, technology transfer, human rights) illustrate the need for a global approach to multicultural education. Taylor acknowledged the multicultural dimension of global issues when he

concluded that life in today's world involves an increasing sense of unity--"the coming together of peoples, cultures, and societies to accomplish common and contradictory purposes" (Taylor 1969, 4).

Given the growing need for intercultural problem solving, global education requires multicultural instruction that addresses the state of today's world as a manifestation of globally interconnected historical events. Taking into account this relationship between multicultural and global education, do the materials:

(a) confront global issues through multiple historical perspectives;

(b) develop a sense of multicultural awareness concerning the state of the planet and the dynamics of global systems that dictate this state; and

(c) help students understand and evaluate conflicts in a multicultural society through studying the global roots of these conflicts?

Criterion Six: Teaching Methods

Teaching methods are implied in all of the criteria mentioned above. They comprise the means for operationalizing the other criteria. Myriad methods texts, sample lesson plans,

and personally developed strategies offer possibilities for developing a multicultural perspective in our classrooms. The following questions highlight a prevalent few.

Do the instructional materials include teaching strategies such as:

(a) role-playing to develop cross-cultural awareness;

(b) cooperative learning activities that increase the self-respect of all students;

(c) questioning techniques that elicit a sense of cognitive dissonance and problem development;

(d) global and multicultural simulations and games; and

(e) action learning strategies that employ community resources to illustrate global connections to our multicultural society?

Conclusion

The chorus of multicultural voices heard in public discourse raises questions about the previously assumed need for a curriculum of assimilation. A corresponding concern about the needs of an increasingly diverse student population has positioned multicultural education as a promising vehicle for preparing a generation facing the challenge of functioning in an

increasingly diversified society.

In response to these developments, multicultural instructional materials for the social studies fill our trade catalogues and conference exhibition halls. The criteria offered here may assist us in our quest to obtain the best materials available as we seek to meet our students' individual needs, to nurture their respect for cultural differences, and to stimulate within them the notion of effective democratic citizenship in a globally interconnected, multicultural society.

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